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ABSTRACT

The Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD)(Arizona) transition program helps prepare Dine (Navajo) special education students for postsecondary opportunities within their own communities and outside the Navajo Reservation. The senior transition class entails a year-long course that focuses on the application process for tribal and federal vocational rehabilitation services; vocational training, including job placement; incorporation of Dine culture; and involvement of family and community. Case studies describe the experiences of three male students with mild or learning disabilities who went through the transition program in 1997-99. During 1997-99, KUSD's Monument Valley High School graduated a total of 32 students with varying disabilities, of which 12 sought postsecondary vocational training. It appears that students are more successful with vocational training if they have parental support and are more likely to apply for postsecondary training if they are better informed about training services. (SV)

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TRANSITION OF NAVAJO SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN A RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

The transition of rural high school students involves a challenging process. The success of completing post secondary vocational training is dependent upon several factors. Such factors include age, parental involvement, and availability of programs. The transition of the special education student is further impacted by their culture.

We believe the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) transition program serves as a model for other school districts wishing to provide a similar program that will promote the retention of culture and language in an educational setting. The senior transition class entails a year long course that focuses on the application process for services from the Navajo Nation, Office of Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation Services, in Kayenta, AZ. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation places students in vocational training schools including job placement based on the results of an extensive interest inventory. Vocational Rehabilitation also provides financial assistance for housing and monthly stipends. The KUSD and community have taken a leadership role in incorporating the philosophy of the Navajo (or Diné, as the Navajo refer to themselves), into the KUSD Transition Program. Within the KUSD, a strong emphasis is placed on family, school and community collaboration. Students, parents, teachers and community members are committed to transitioning special needs students from high school into post-secondary education, the workplace, and the community. The Kayenta Unified School District, located in Kayenta, Arizona, is the research site of this informal investigation.

Kayenta is located on the Diné Reservation, which covers 24,000 square miles and is equivalent to the size of the state of West Virginia. Parts of the Diné Nation are located in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The Diné inhabit the largest reservation in the United States. However, only approximately 160,000 people live in this extremely rural area. Kayenta is one of the largest communities on the reservation and it is where the Kayenta Unified School District is located. The population of Kayenta is approximately 5,000. It is not uncommon for some students attending KUSD schools to travel on the bus two hours, one-way.

From 1998-1999, the enrollment for the KUSD was 2,565 students. There are four schools within in the KUSD System. The KUSD Primary school houses grades K-2, the Intermediate school houses grades 3-5, the Middle school houses grades 6-8, and Monument Valley High School houses grades 9- 12. Two hundred and twenty-three students are enrolled in special education programs in the KUSD, one hundred and one of these are located at the high school.

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Ten percent of the KUSD student population receives special education services. Diné is the principal language. At the Primary and Intermediate schools there is at least one bilingual class for each grade. After grade 5, English becomes the primary language of instruction via primarily ESL certified teachers.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to inform interested individuals about the Kayenta Unified District's transition program which helps prepare Diné youth for post-secondary opportunities within their own communities and outside the reservation. Diné Special Education personnel describe their transition program and its emphasis on retaining Diné culture and language. Successful case studies of students' transition out of rural special education programs and into the workplace are discussed.

More specifically, information is provided regarding the following:

- The transition program at KUSD
- District and local resources
- The number of students who have successfully transitioned from high school from 1997-1998
- Increased need for parental involvement
- Navajo expectations in adulthood
- Navajo traditional work ethic, values, morals, social skills, communication, and community involvement
- Confidence in beliefs surrounding ones traditional self and family.

Methodology

Information for this paper was obtained through review of KUSD documents, interviews with four special education employees who worked closely with the transition program and four former students. We examined records from the Office of Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation Services at Kayenta. Furthermore, the authors have drawn on their personal experience working with students transitioning into the community and/or higher education. Interviews regarding cultural expectations of adults within the Navajo community have also taken place. To give readers an idea of the types of students who have been enrolled in this program, we have included three case studies, one per year since the graduating class of 1997.

Questionnaire and Interview Results of Four Students

1) How were your parents involved in school?
   Of the interviewees, two had parents heavily involved, and two had little involvement in school in which case the students signed their own IEP paperwork.

2) Did you attend a vocational school or have any kind of training after high school?
   Two replied, yes, and two replied, no. Those who answered "No" are preparing for placement in a vocational training program.

3) If yes, did you need certification for the job or area you work in?
   The students who attended a vocational school indicated yes.

4) If yes, what kind of certification did you receive?
   They received certification after nine months of training as a medical assistant and in eight different kinds of welding (e.g., pipe). The other two are currently seeking certification.

5) Do you currently work at a job that requires these skills?

Two students were gainfully employed. One returned to Phoenix for job placement. One student has been employed since graduation.

6) What agencies did you go through to get information about vocational schools and special training and certification?

All students indicated participation in their senior transition class trip to Phoenix, AZ. This includes attending workshops about various vocational training schools including Life Development Institute (LDI) and Maricopa Skills Center. The students independently processed their own applications after graduation with the Navajo Nation Office of Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation.

7) How did you incorporate your traditional beliefs in your education?

The students continued to practice their cultural beliefs regardless of where they were. One student did not attend her graduation of vocational training because of a ceremony. One student traveled home most weekends to participate in and contribute to family activities (i.e. raise the sheep). One student missed many days of school because of family obligations/chores.

Case Studies

These cases are included to assist the reader in contextualizing the transition programs in the KUSD.

1997

Joe (not real name), was 19 years of age at the time of this interview. He graduated from the Monument Valley High School special education program in May 1997. He had an identified disability of mild mental retardation (MIMR). Joe had many behavior problems during the four years of his high school career. He was verbally abusive (e.g., use of inappropriate language toward his peers and teachers). Joe's behaviors impacted his education so that his least restrictive environment was recommended to be in a self-contained classroom. Joe's academic curriculum emphasized training in developing and generalizing independent living skills.

Joe's parents were moderately supportive of the many behavior intervention plans implemented with Joe for his behavior problems. The parents usually came in for requested meetings. The father agreed to the behavior modification program of using positive reinforcers for demonstrations of appropriate behaviors at specific time intervals.

It was not uncommon for Joe to hit and take things from his peers. For the safety of others, it was necessary to have constant supervision. One thing that was very helpful to Joe in terms of making smoother transitions between activities was keeping a personal schedule of daily activities. This technique minimized his rebellion against instructional activities. Joe was also recommended for individual counseling but noncompliance made that intervention difficult.

Joe was connected with Navajo Nation Office of Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation Services during his senior year in high school. His application packet was completed with his father's cooperation. His father brought in the required documents to complete his application packet. He was also very much interested in Joe attaining employment after his high school graduation.

Joe kept his appointments with Vocational Rehabilitation Services and was accepted to the Life Development Institute in Phoenix, Arizona. He completed the program, which entailed learning to live independently. He then started further vocational training in the area of auto body in basic refinishing and metal repair. Unfortunately, he did not complete this program. He reported that he was employed at the Phoenix

International airport as security personnel for two months while studying at the Maricopa Skills Center. Joe also reported that being away from home was difficult because he lost contact with his family on the reservation. Joe stated that his parents could not visit him as they had no reliable transportation to visit him in Phoenix. He also indicated that his finances were restricted as he received a small stipend on a monthly basis, which he reports to have been just enough to cover his immediate expenses. When asked in an interview whether he had expected this type of a budget, Joe stated that he was familiar with budgeting his money from his senior transition class in high school.

Joe is currently staying home with his family on the Navajo reservation. He is unsure of how well he will do if he should attempt another program off the reservation. He reports he is comfortable helping his family with the care of the family livestock at home for now. Vocational Rehabilitation Services has made appointments with Joe to do a follow up with him and possibly assist him in continuing and completing his program. When Joe was given information about the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation's attempts to assist him, he reported that he was doubtful of his success.

1998

Billy (not his real name), an 18-year-old male student, graduated from high school in May 1998. He was identified as having a learning disability (LD) as a result of processing deficits. This student took many of the courses offered by the Monument Valley High School Special Education program with an emphasis on basic academic areas. Billy had many reports of behavior problems particularly during his senior year. His behavior problems ranged from stealing compact disc players and compact discs from his peers, to keeping a set of master school district keys over a period of time. His academic performance warranted a C average on a daily basis. He was generally compliant and respectful toward adults. There were some reports of Billy engaging in inappropriate sexual activities during school hours. Billy's level of academic performance was approximately at the 5th grade level. His behaviors interrupted his attendance as he was placed on home instruction for one academic semester. He was quite skilled in some vocational areas involving building homes. One project that Billy completed during his home instruction placement included documenting his daily activities and building an addition to his mother's home. His work was particularly impressive as he made cost estimates of building materials (using the most current newspaper flyers) and compared them with the actual cost of materials.

Often Billy's mother and sister came in for parent conferences (his sister acting as an interpreter). His mother maintained a traditional Navajo lifestyle including raising livestock for a living. Billy's older sister completed two years of college. The mother expected Billy to find employment after high school graduation. She also had anticipated that he would be married soon after graduation (Billy was already living with a partner at the time of his enrollment).

During the month of April, a month before graduation, Billy participated in the annual senior trip to Phoenix Metropolitan area. He visited several vocational training schools where he received information about various certification programs. The senior transition class also assisted Billy in applying to the Office of Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation in Kayenta.

After graduation, Billy applied for a welding certification program in Phoenix, Arizona. In an interview, Billy indicated that his senior transition program was important in preparing him for independent living. His transition classroom curricula included learning to interpret his pay stubs, keeping a bank account, balancing a budget, and reading bus route information. Billy reports that this was helpful to him in adjusting to life in the city. He stated that he was afraid of living in the city in the beginning because the environment was different from the quiet reservation life. He is now certified in eight areas of welding and supports his girlfriend and new daughter. Billy reported that his sister was very supportive of his education as she visited him in Phoenix and provided transportation home almost every weekend. Billy is pleased that the vocational training program emphasized

hands-on learning opportunities rather than the textbook approach. He reports that he was able to maintain contact with this family through weekend visits and through traditional family obligations.

1999

Zeek (not real name) was in the special education program in his school district since third grade. He was identified as a student with learning disability. By his senior year in high school, Zeek's academic level of performance was at approximately the second grade level. He often did not complete his daily assignments. Certain days, Zeek was very motivated and tried his best to remain focused on the task at hand. Most school days, Zeek did not pay attention to the classroom activities. One of Zeek's strengths included regular attendance. Zeek enjoyed wiping down his classroom desktops, windows, and chairs. He told his senior transition class teacher that his post-secondary plans included becoming a gainfully employed custodian.

Zeek did not have a strong support system at home. Often he did not have homework completed and parents did not attend many Limited English Proficiency meetings. Zeek followed a group of peers who were caught for truancy and illegal possession of drugs at school. Zeek had been caught for suspicion of illegal drugs at school as well. The teachers were frustrated with Zeek who laughed at behavioral correction. He would acknowledge his inappropriate behavior then get caught for ditching class five minutes later. There were questions of his ability to make cause and effect connections.

Zeek's senior transition class walked him through the application process for Vocational Rehabilitation training. The course also allowed him to explore various employment options. With this information, Zeek completed his application and is anticipating placement at North American Technical College in Phoenix, Arizona. He will be entering a nine-month certification program for carpentry. His parents remained uninvolved in the application process.

Results 1997

Monument Valley High School Special Education Department graduated 14 students with varying disabilities. Seven students were male and seven were female. Ten of the students were LD, two were MR and two were MIMR. After graduation, four students completed some type of post-secondary vocational training; two were male and two were female. Of the four students trained, the areas of training included auto body in basic refinishing, metal repair and carpentry. According to the Navajo Nation Office of Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation Center, there is documentation that the two female students have completed training.

1998

Ten students have graduated from Monument Valley High School Special Education Department with varying disabilities. Nine students were male and one was female. Eight of the students were LD, one was Hearing-Impaired, and one was Emotional Disabled (ED). Of the ten graduates, three male and one female student sought some kind of vocational training. Three completed training in one of the following areas: welding, medical assistant, or food preparation. One was accepted to a vocational institution but did not attend. One other student is seeking higher education and an internship in Washington DC with the Department of Defense System. Two students are gainfully employed in their certified areas in their local community.

1999

Eight Monument Valley High School Special Education students with identified disabilities graduated in 1999. Two were female and six were male, one student was labeled ED, one had suffered severe Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and six were LD students. Of the four male students who sought some kind of vocational training, two completed training and two are preparing for enrollment. Of the three LD students and the TBI student, areas

of interest for vocational training included facility maintenance, carpentry, and heavy equipment and food preparation. All four students who pursued post-secondary vocational had work experience prior to high school graduation.

Conclusion

We think that students are more successful with completing vocational training if they have parental support. The more the students know about various vocational training programs, the more likely they are to apply for post-secondary training. The seniors who learn about the services are more likely to follow through with their application. This program only began in 1997. The senior transition class has been an important course in terms of preparing for transition and making it successful.

Even though we feel there are always ways to improve transition services to our students in rural areas, we think KUSD has made considerable progress in this area. The continued evaluation of their transition program will ensure the highest quality services are being provided to the KUSD students.